



GameChangers
Season 2: Episode 1
Maria Thattil

Seth Robinson: Welcome to Game Changers, the show that's about playing by your own rules when it comes to your career. Join us as we speak with people who've taken the road less traveled and found their niche. I'm your host, Seth Robinson. This season, we're taking some time out to reconnect, exploring the ways our game changers of forming connections in the world by creating new communities, spaces, and technologies.

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Seth Robinson: Today we're joined by a guest who has taken her voice to the global stage, reaching thousands and bringing them together to build a positive online community.

Maria Thattil: My name is Maria Thattil. I am a former University of Melbourne student. I'm a writer, I'm a speaker, and I'm Miss Universe Australia 2020.

Seth Robinson: So you have quite a few plates that you're spinning there. I believe you started studying a Bachelor of Science and then went onto business. How does that lead down this road you've taken with so many plates?

Maria Thattil: I think that's the funniest and best way to describe it, because honestly, a creative multi-hyphen career does feel like that. It feels like there are constantly plates in the air, but there's so much enjoyment in juggling them. So I think, with me, I started my degree, my first degree, when I was 17 or 18 years old, I went into a Bachelor of Applied Sciences and Psychology, and at that age I thought, "Well, I've got to have a five-year plan." And I thought it needed to be super safe and conventional, because I think there was a lack of representation of people like myself doing unconventional creative

careers, and going off the beaten path. So I started the psychology degree, finished it, got into the Honors Program thinking, "Well, the logical next step is to be a clinical psych," but something in my gut felt off, and I thought, "I don't know that this is what I want to do working in clinical practice."

So I actually didn't complete that degree. I took a couple of years off then I worked full time in fashion retail, and I really loved the knowledge that I had in psychology, applying it to the work that I was doing there. So I ended up deciding I would pursue a Master of Management, and lo and behold, I ended up at Melbourne Business School and I completed my Master of Management. I majored in HR. I started a corporate career, but whilst I was doing the Masters, I really started feeling this calling to pursue something creative. And the first expression of creativity was in makeup. And the reason that I was drawn to that was because I actually didn't have really many makeup artists who knew how to cater to my skin tone or do my makeup being a woman of color. So I started doing a makeup qualification and just sharing what I learned on social media.

And just following the breadcrumbs ultimately led to that social platform being used for more than just beauty and fashion, but it was about championing social causes I believed in. And with Miss Universe Australia, in essence, it was a decision I made the same year that I applied. Before that, I'd never considered it. And I thought, "If this actually goes right, I could change the way that, one, that is perceived, but, two, how I would use the platform to serve as a catalyst for all the changes I want to see."

Seth Robinson: You mentioned the term creative career a couple of times there. How is it that you define that idea of a creative career?

Maria Thattil: So I now work for myself. In November last year, I resigned from my corporate job to make more time and to be able to invest more energy into my own entrepreneurial pursuits. And so, in essence, a creative career for me, and when I think about it, it's a career that, personally, it's a nice combination of a mix of business and arts. And I think last year in the challenging social context of 2020, it gave birth to this space where now people are talking about a lot of timely topical and sometimes polarizing issues that need to be spoken about. And I have been having conversations about these sorts of things on my platform early on, but it really comes down to how you're delivering your message. So my career, when I talk about it being a creative career, it's an opportunity for me to tell my story, to share myself and my values through my work, and I think that's a privilege in itself.

At the moment, we're in this really interesting time where there is a bit of a digital revolution, not a bit, there is a digital revolution, and life and work as we know it is changing. And even five years ago, I think the narrative around what your career should look like, there is an emphasis on doing things that are safe and conventional and maybe not taking too many risks. And I was actually working on a shoot, and it was for a beauty campaign, and the woman who was directing the creative behind it had said that she had worked with this company for 20 years and she was saying how when she

was my age, she felt that she didn't particularly have a choice in terms of taking risks and going out on a limb and doing things that were a little bit more entrepreneurial or even just changing organizations.

Because, at the time, to be considered seriously and professionally and valuable professionally, you needed to find a place to work and stay there for a significant period of time, improve yourself and work your way up, and things like that. So I think now the narrative is changing.

Seth Robinson: Obviously, a lot has changed in terms of workplaces and the way that looks in 2020. Do you think that some of those older structures, things like the 9:00 to 5:00 job, do you think that's done?

Maria Thattil: Yeah, absolutely. And from someone who's worked in HR and in a number of different industries, that conversation is there. And I think that we're living in a time where if an organization is going to show resistance to these changes that are going to happen, whether or not people are ready, they're going to struggle to survive. And I think that the organizations that are going to do well are those that are going to be adaptable. Maybe two, three years ago, many organizations couldn't have even conceived of allowing the people to work from home for consistent and sustained periods of time. But I think with the pandemic last year, it's forced people to think differently and to see actually we have to be adaptable in how we work.

Now that we've seen that that's possible, I think that they will be more of an emphasis on digital and virtual elements of work and workplaces and working environments. And I think that organizations that are resistant to that, when we've seen that it works, when we have research on productivity, when we know that this is where the world is going, I think they're going to struggle. So I think it's important to embrace the change because it's coming anyway.

Seth Robinson: Maria has taken her personal brand online and was one of the first to claim the title of social media influencer. But what does that title mean to her?

Maria Thattil: There are so many misconceptions around that word influencer, and the reason to that I do understand it and it's valid, and I think ultimately what is a worthy and noble use of social media, that in itself is a subjective concept. And I think it all comes down to individual judgment. But I think for the most part, people seem to think that being an influencer fits into a very narrow mould. But a lot of what I'm about is challenging what the mould is. So when I think of what an influencer is, this is somebody with significant reach with impact, and they have the ability to influence for impact. And that's how I do it, and I know that a lot of people are starting to change-

Maria Thattil: And that's how I do it. And I know that a lot of people are starting to change the way that they use their platforms. They're not just billboards for marketing and advertisements. They're using this platform to actually influence something positive, to influence change in line with their values. But ultimately, you're someone then who can drive change.

Seth Robinson: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Maria Thattil: So when we then look at, okay, how do you get to the point of being an influencer? I think that there's no one road, but I think the ability to build community is paramount to it. And for me, it wasn't something that I was consciously doing. And that's the thing. So many people look at what potentially other influencers or business people have done, and they think, "Okay, that looks great." Or, "The end result looks great." So the intention and the aspiration then is to, "Okay, I want to get to there. I want to do what they're doing. I want to have what they have." But I think if you lack a why but you have an end goal, but you don't know why you're doing it short of wanting to have the output and the end result, I think you will struggle. Because this space, the digital space, the social space, it's constantly evolving. And in order to find innovative ways to connect with your audience, in order to find unique ways to unite people in a space that is constantly changing, that's saturated, then a new platform comes up, then there's this and there's that. You need to have a why behind what you're doing.

Five, six years ago before people were talking about racism openly or exclusion, I think I was having very honest conversations about what my challenges as a woman of color in Australia to find makeup. And then sharing, "Well, this is why now I'm doing a makeup course." And then as I was doing a makeup course, I was sharing pieces of that, this and that and the other. And it was taking people on a journey and being honest about my life, my experiences, and what I believed. And when you do that, people start to resonate with you and the right people will start to follow and go, "Okay, this is interesting. I feel that. I feel seen, very represented here." So that sort of started to build a little bit of a foundation for building an audience. And then as my platform grew with what I started doing, I was working with brands. It gave me more exposure.

And then with Miss Universe Australia, it was very interesting because after winning my following almost doubled. But the thing I noticed was that sense of community initially felt like it was gone, because all of a sudden there were new people who were following. Right up until that point, I felt like I built a beautiful community. Then I won, the following doubled and all of a sudden they were all these people who didn't know me just following for the hype or because they were curious and that community went away. So it was almost like I had to start from scratch to address these new people on, "Hey, this is what I'm about. This is what we want to do in this space. And this is why I'm here." And the ability to communicate that is it comes down to every piece of content you put out there. What's the message? What's your why? If somebody doesn't know you, if they see a piece of your content, do they get a sense of what you're about? So now a lot of what I do very intentional and strategic.

Seth Robinson: You've brushed up against something there, which I am really curious about, which is the pace of social media. It moves quickly. It's always evolving. How is it that you manage to keep pace with that change while staying true to those ideas you want to be putting out there?

Maria Thattil:

Yeah. I think I can give you quite a tangible piece of advice. For anyone who's listening that is thinking, how do I do content for so many different mediums? Ultimately these mediums, it can be overwhelming as and when something is coming out. And if you're like me, sometimes a bit of a noob with technology, it can be intimidating to hear, "Oh my goodness, how do you use TikTok?" Or, "Now Clubhouse is out, how am I meant to use this?" And I can be a little bit of a late adopter, which I don't recommend. I think it's better to embrace it and jump on it. But if you're like me, sometimes it's intimidating and that's okay. But ultimately you need to ask yourself, "Well, if this medium is taking off and if the algorithm is great initially, it's going to enable you to reach so many more people with your message."

And again, it comes back to that why. Because if you don't have a strong alliance, well, this could just be extra work. Don't really want to do it. Don't have time for it. But if your why is strong enough, it'll tell you, "Do it. Make the effort. Tap into it because you're reaching so many people and your impact is going to be there." Or maybe your why is different, but it's strong enough to push you out of your comfort zone.

And then when it comes to that tangible piece of advice around content, a really great bit of advice that I've received was... Okay. For example, if you're creating a piece of content, workshop it for different medium so that it speaks to the audience of that medium and delivers it in a format that they're familiar with. So I actually did my first magazine shoot, which was amazing, and I'm so humbled to have been able to do it. And I want to share that with people in that experience, so I filmed it and loved it. So I can put that into a YouTube video. Then I can cut it down to size and make it more short, quippy and great for an Instagram reel, because at the moment, that is what's getting the most organic reach out of all the functions of Instagram. Then I can workshop into a video and add some music and funny captions and repurpose it for TikTok. So it's all the same content. I'm just workshoping it for different mediums so that I'm reaching the most people and bringing the most people on my journey.

Seth Robinson:

So you've got a really strong idea of the why and we've brushed up against the what, talking about the content. Can you tell me a little bit about your projects and what you're working on?

Maria Thattil:

Yeah, absolutely. So I've always been a pretty creative person and loved writing. I kept a journal for the past eight years now, consistently. And when I was younger, I used to keep journals, albeit they were really silly and full of abundance of things from stories to songs, to poems, to whatever. But have loved writing and it's been something that's played a really big part of my life from childhood to this point. And with social media, it started off with captions and spilling the inner workings of my mind via these captions where I'd share a little bit more, and it became a bit of an online journal and people resonated. And then for a period, I had a blog where I would write blog posts on things that I cared about. And again, people connected. So writing has always been this medium for connection for me.

Now it's gotten to the point where since winning Miss Universe Australia, I had these career aspirations that I thought would take say five years to achieve, but because of this wonderful opportunity served as a catalyst to bring it all into fruition this year. So I've started writing articles and opinion pieces on social justice issues and things that I care about. And I've been fortunate enough to have them published in media publications and they're getting that reach. So I've written on issues around race and inclusivity. I've recently authored a piece on sexism and sexual harassment in the workplace and what I think needs to change, and that's fear. It's not simple things to write about and it requires me to leverage not only my education, but my corporate experience, and then my vision for what I would like to see change. So these pieces, they're from the heart, they're from experience, they're insightful and what I hope will open a number of different conversations.

In terms of speaking, I've started working professionally as a speaker too. And so far, I've given a number of talks to global conglomerates like Procter and Gamble, L'Oreal. But most recently, Verizon Media, there are HuffPost and Yahoo, and things like that. And the talks are around, most recently, it was the importance of diversity and inclusion in all their journalistic efforts. It was sharing my experience as a child of immigrants growing up in Western context and how a lack of representation in mainstream media were really impacting my self image, my perception of my prospects, and it then flows on to impact you health wise, socially. So it's having these really raw and reflective conversations with the people who are actually in charge of making decisions that impact us. I'm really humbled to be able to do that.

And then Mind With Me. Mind With Me is the most fulfilling thing I have the privilege of doing, Seth, and I'm just so grateful to get to do it. It was a series that I came...

Maria Thattil:

I'm just so grateful to get to do it. It was a series that I came up with in May last year in the middle of a really tumultuous year. Everybody was locked down, and we were going through a number of different social movements around race, sexism. And what I was seeing was because everybody was tense because of the pandemic anyway, and spending a heightened amount of time online, the conversations were polarizing. And I was observing that people I knew were saying that they were scared to jump in on the conversation. They didn't want to say anything. They didn't know how to participate. And for me, that kind of fear is paralyzing. And it's paralyzing when you're trying to pursue progress, right? In order to progress and grow and learn, you need to be able to talk to unlearn. You need to be able to talk to dissect different perspectives.

So I thought, well, what if we had a space where we can counter polarization and segregation and division? We had a space that was countering that with unity, and it was a safe, inclusive space where people could actually share, "Hang on, this is a gap in my knowledge. And what do you think of this? And let's talk about our different perspectives." And I wanted people to walk away feeling no longer afraid to use their voice, but also no longer afraid to be their authentic self, to actually break societal boxes of, "Well, I should be

this. I should be that," to just show up as themselves, as their inspired selves.

So I started hosting weekly lives on Instagram, and now we're about 32 episodes in this series. On just Instagram alone, it's amassed over 350,000 views all online. People join from all over the world every week. And we talk about uncomfortable things. We've talked about sexual harassment, mental health issues, that pressure to be productive in a pandemic amongst all the other challenges that have emerged with COVID-19. So it's this wonderful space, and now it's actually being evolved into its own podcast. And I'm so excited to share that. Mind With Me is going to turn into a podcast. And for me, just know you heard it here first, but I'm going to be evolving it into a much, much bigger beast. And I'm doing that with the intention of reaching so many people and empowering so many other people

Seth Robinson: You're tackling these really difficult issues, and you're being part of those conversations and facilitating that space, is that emotionally quite taxing? Do you find it difficult to do that week in and week out?

Maria Thattil: It can be emotionally taxing because it is emotional labor, right? I think a lot of the topics that I've spoken about... Just off the top of my head, I have done an episode talking about what it's like to be excluded from certain industries and being judged based on race and height. In Hawaii, for example, I did think the only career I could have was a safe and conventional career. I've spoken about experiences with sexual harassment in order to facilitate a space where other survivors could reclaim their own power, race-based discrimination.

And to be able to hold a space, you have to give something, you have to be vulnerable. So it is taxing emotionally. But for me, I think it's really important to do this work because I wasn't hearing a lot of these conversations in a space that is similar to Mind With Me. I mean, people are coming to that space and making friends virtually because the kind of people that are participating, once they see what the space is, they are respectful, they're open, they treat people with dignity and there's an ability to speak about these hard topics where you're free of fear.

And I think that's the biggest thing. So whilst it can be a lot, I just make sure that I know that before I speak on a topic, I need to give myself adequate time to do my research. And then after I've done the topic, I need to give myself a bit of space before I start engaging and debriefing with people. So I think to be able to give out, I need to also give to myself in the process because it does take a lot, but I love it. So I'll always make time for it.

Speaker 1: We are now going to announce Miss Universe Australia 2020. And it is Maria Thattil.

Seth Robinson: One thing that we haven't spoken about yet is of course your experience with Miss Universe. You mentioned something at the very beginning of the interview, which is that you wanted to change people's perceptions of what it means to be Miss Universe as well. How is that going?

Maria Thattil:

I think it's going really well, actually. It's funny. Miss Universe was never really... it was never really a realm that I traditionally saw myself playing in for a number of factors. I had a misunderstanding of what it was, and I also thought I didn't fit the mold of what it took to be in that space.

After seeing last year's winner, who was an Indian-Australian lawyer, Priya Serrao, and seeing the women that came through the program, sorry, two years ago, after seeing that cohort of women and how different they were, they were women in STEM, they were women who were willing to use their voice to speak up about experiences they had with abuse and used that platform to change that. They were women who did not fit the physical mold of what I would have thought, oh goodness, well, to be a Miss Universe, you need to look like this.

All in all, I saw these women come through who were speaking for what they believed in and they challenged molds. And I thought that gave me what I needed to think I can do that, too. So when I went into the program, I was very intentional and I knew that there was going to be conversation around, for example, the fact that my ethnic background, it is a racial minority and I'm competing in a space where people have traditionally Anglo Celtic perceptions of what Australia is. So I was potentially opening myself up to a little bit of racism. I was opening myself up to a little bit of sexism for people who thought, "Well, hang on, you're subjecting yourself to being judged on your looks" because that's what the perception is. I knew that going into it, this is what I would get, but I also knew that, hang on, well, let me tell you a little bit about me and the women who were here, because that will change your perception of what it is.

And I think that the women we see coming through like Zozibini, who's the current Miss Universe, they're paving the way for a totally different future for this program. And I think like anything, for something to stay relevant, it needs to evolve and it needs to change. And the fact that I, as a woman of color, who also doesn't fit the physical mold of what a traditional Miss Universe would be, being five foot three, for example, people still debate my height, but I'm showing people that irrespective of markers of your social identity, whether it is your race or your height or your background or whatever it is, you can be impactful and you can show up and take up and create space in arenas that you want to do that in.

Speaker 2:

Maria, if you had the world's attention for 30 seconds, what would you say?

Maria Thattil:

Take three seconds to be silent.

I asked you to do that because I wanted to show you that powerlessness and injustice are not always dressed up in the way that you think. Sometimes, it can look exactly like that, your silence. We have spent most of the year in masks, but how many of us have lived our lives behind another kind of mask, a mask of silence for going after our dreams, challenging the norm, or speaking for those who cannot speak for themselves?

So I am here to remind you that so long as you have your will and your voice, you have everything you need to turn any experience into power, because what can look like an abyss of fear can really be the birthplace of opportunity and the time to show up as a leader in your life...

Maria Thattil: The birthplace of opportunity. And the time to show up as a leader in your life is right now. So in terms of challenging people's perceptions, initially when I have been giving interviews or things like that, I will get the questions of, "Tell us why Miss Universe is relevant." And all I need to say is if you see the body of work that I'm doing that's committed to debunking certain exclusive ideologies that do oppress people today, the main reason that that work is getting the amplification that it's getting, where I've actually been able to sit on national television and say, "This is what systemic racism looks like and this is how we can do better."

The reason I'm getting to have a mic to my voice right now is because of this platform. And even though there are things about it that I would want to see progress, I think that that change has to come from within. And I'm going to be more influential, having been a part of it, being able to take it all in and say, "Well, this is what needs to change," and then use my voice. It's more impactful that way.

Seth Robinson: You mentioned storytelling before, I imagine there is where the power of storytelling really asserts itself.

Maria Thattil: Oh yeah, absolutely. And I think for someone who might be a little bit more academically inclined, which I am. For example, when I look into any concept, before I speak to a certain topic, I make sure I do my research, and that might be the psych grad in me you or I need to... If I'm saying something, well, why am I saying it? Is it backed by empirical research? And beyond that, if I'm explaining a concept, I'm somebody who definitely believes in the power of your thoughts, and your energy, and curating it intentionally. But if I'm saying that, I need to know the how. Well, how does this work? Why is mindfulness good for you and where's the science behind it?

But in order to make it digestible to a broader audience, you need to tell it like a story, because not everybody wants to hear research regurgitated. So that's definitely something that, as a communicator, as someone who I think does work that educates, it's been a really important skill to hone and refine because that's what captivates people. And a lot of the times to be impactful in your messaging, it's more about your delivery and how you are connecting to people through the story than what you're actually saying. So storytelling is really important.

Seth Robinson: This is a question we ask all our guests and I think it will be particularly interesting hearing your answer as someone who has taken a career that maybe has a very different kind of CV. But what's one thing that you wouldn't put on your resume traditionally that's gotten you to where you are today?

Maria Thattil:

I think that one thing is actually an underlying theme that manifests in many different instances that I was actually afraid to acknowledge, and admit, and talk about, because I thought it somehow reflected poorly on me. The one thing that I traditionally wouldn't have put on my resumes are the things that I've been told over the course of my life. And I guess for the context of this conversation, some of the inappropriate comments I've gotten professionally from people that initially deterred me and broke my confidence and I thought compromised my professional value. But in hindsight, those comments and those perceptions were the driving factor behind me working so hard to challenge these antiquated ideas about what a woman who is professionally valuable looks like.

I had people telling me that in order to be successful and to have a good career as a strong woman, I needed to focus less on how I presented, how I dressed, how I engaged with other people, not being too extroverted. I don't want to come across bossy, too hard, or things like that. And every time I had gotten this feedback or when I'd heard from former male recruiters that made remarks about me potentially landing really great jobs because of how I looked. There was one particular instance where I phone interviewed with two women for a role and I got it. And the assumption was made that I walked into a room of male management and they liked what they saw. And it was comments like these over the years that made me super, super conscious of is it something I'm doing in how I'm presenting and who I am that is going to make me inherently less worthy and less capable than another woman in a professional context.

And that's the kind of thing I would avoid. But now these comments and those experiences, they're something that I like to tell people about, because I think it makes me stronger professionally. I think it challenges a lot of ideas we have around what a strong woman looks like in a professional context. And I think that these are the conversations we need to have to drive change. So it is more of an overarching theme in essence. I wouldn't have put all the words thrown at me on my resume necessarily, but now it's something that I speak openly about, because I think it's important to challenge these ideas and to grow beyond.

Seth Robinson:

Thank you to our guest, Maria Thattil. More and more people are entering the workforce or rethinking their careers. Taking the time to consider how they can join these global conversations can make a difference. If we keep that mission in mind, our careers can be an adventure with space to be creative and have an impact. Subscribe to GameChangers for new episodes or catch up at fbe.unimelb.edu.au/gamechangers. If you're interested in women challenging stereotypes like Maria, check out our Women are the Business interview with none other than former prime minister, Julia Gillard. GameChangers is recorded on Wurundjeri Land. The podcast is produced by me, Seth Robinson, and edited by Michelle Macklem with support from the University of Melbourne.